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XXI.—CHARLES LAMB, THE GREATEST OF THE ESSAYISTS ¹

It has been the custom of historians of literature to discuss essays as if there were no essential difference between, say the Essays of Bacon and those of Macaulay, or between the *Spectator* and the *Essays in Criticism*. In his recent book, *The English Essay and Essayists*, a work which, however comprehensive, leaves much to be desired on the score of adequacy of treatment, Professor Walker makes a distinction between “essays *par excellence*” and compositions on scientific, philosophical, historical, or critical subjects, which agree with the former, “only in being comparatively short and in being more or less incomplete.” Lamb’s essays he considers the best example of the “literary form;” yet when he comes to discuss the *Essays of Elia* he does not attempt to show wherein these pieces differ from the compositions of Elia’s contemporaries or successors. Every reader is vaguely conscious of a difference of *kind* between the essays of various writers; for example, between those of Macaulay, Stevenson, Carlyle, etc., and the pieces by Hazlitt or Charles Lamb; and it is part of the intention of the following paper to indicate the nature of this difference. Generally speaking, the secret lies in the fact that Lamb carried on the traditions of the English essay, the tradition that found its first conscious spokesman in Bacon, was afterwards perpetuated in the periodical essays of the eighteenth century, and found its fullest, if not its latest, expressions in the *Essays of Elia*.

¹ The remarks on the early history of the essay are a condensation of Chapter I, of *The Beginnings of the English Essay* (University of Toronto Studies) by the present writer.

I

A brief history of the essay from its beginning will help to show Lamb's position amongst the essayists. In the first place, it must be noticed that the essay began, and for a quarter of a century flourished, as a pretty distinct form. Bacon introduced it into English under its present name. Cornwallis,¹ Robert Johnson,² Tuval,³ and the author of *Horae Subsecivae*⁴ published collections which are now unknown except to the specialist. The numerous writings of more recent date bearing the general title have made the essay extremely hard to define, but such was not the case in the first half of the sixteenth century. The custom of essayists, their statements about their own writings, and the definition given by at least one schoolmaster for the guidance of pupils in essay-writing, enable us to distinguish the essay from the mass of pamphlet literature of that time. It is a "short discourse" in prose written in a leisurely manner and in an urbane, non-controversial spirit, in which are developed, according to a plan more or less vague, "undigested" thoughts on such commonplace subjects as ignorance, justice, hate, love, pride, humility, etc. The style, usually aphoristic and epigrammatic, is enlivened by illustration and anecdote generally drawn from classical literature. While the purpose is usually diversion, there is frequently present a more or less didactic tone. Sometimes the commonplaces are the personal experience or feelings of the writer, a feature which is specially noticeable in Montaigne's *Essais* and the compositions of Cornwallis and

¹ *Essayes*, in two parts, 1631.

² *Essaies, or Rather Imperfect Offers*, 1607.

³ *Vade Mecum*, 1629.

⁴ Published in 1620.

Cowley. In Bacon's *Essays* even, there is a great deal of this autobiographical element,—much more than appears on the surface.

Many difficulties are met in applying this description to the actual compositions of acknowledged essay-writers, and the most obvious difficulty lies in the fact that it takes no account of the "critical" essay. Custom seems to have decided that literature is the theme *par excellence* for the essay. Moreover, when literature is the subject, the orthodox, dispassionate essay "mood" is frequently displaced by a pardonable enthusiasm. Several of the early essayists shook tentatively the boughs of the tree of criticism. Bacon's *Of Discourse* treats of the arts of conversation, and *Of Masques and Triumphs* deals with the rules for the proper presentation of two forms of entertainment more or less connected with literature. John Stephen's essay *Of Poetry* (1615) suggests Sidney's *Defence* in many places. Cornwallis's *Of Essayes and Bookes* touches upon almost every kind of literature in the author's usual desultory manner, and Felltham⁵ rambles over the same ground, pausing here and there to examine hastily the questions of literary criticism made current by Sidney's *Defence*. To these children of the Renaissance, such subjects were the commonplaces of conversation. Nothing lay nearer the hearts of these fireside philosophers than the "Bookes" which they loved, and which frequently furnished the occasion of their essays, as they generally supplied them with illustrative anecdote.

The pieces just mentioned are all contained in books of essays. There is here no question of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or of Sidney's *Apologie*, all such performances lying quite beyond the scope of the present discus-

⁵ *Resolves*, 1623.

sion. Professor Walker has gone astray in seeking for "Anticipations of the Essay" in the pamphlet literature of the Elizabethan period. Professor Gregory Smith's *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, from which he seems to have drawn most of his material for the chapter, are in no sense essays, except in the loosest of modern applications of the term. There is as much similarity between the urbanity of the essayists and the spirit of Gosson's *School of Abuse* as there is between the sweet reasonableness of Newman's *Apologia* and the venom of Milton's pamphlet on Divorce. Anticipations there were, of course, but they are to be sought in the place to which Bacon pointed, the *Morals* of Plutarch and the *Epistolae* of Seneca; in the classical discourses of John of Salisbury and the half-paganized moral sermons of the mediæval theologians.

The conditions which produced the eighteenth-century periodicals led to a change of tone in the essay, but the instrument remained essentially the same. What we know as the English Renaissance, had run its course in England in matters of literature as well as in religion and politics. Men of letters no longer wrote for the delectation of some few who, like themselves, were steeped in classical lore. The readers for whom they wrote were no longer men of the stay-at-home kind who took a quiet delight in the pagan speculations of a belated stoic philosopher. Their home was the club, the dining-hall, the coffee-house; their subjects of conversation, the last new play, the last book of poetry, the latest fashion, and the latest scandal. Furthermore, the appeal of writers was no longer to men alone. Women had taken their place not only on the stage but amongst the playwrights themselves. In putting forward his project of an academy for women, Defoe expressed his contempt for the barbarism of his so-called civilized country in denying the advantages of education to the

female sex. The number of pamphlets, letters, and books dealing with the deportment and the conversation proper to young ladies, testifies to the growing importance attached by men of letters to women readers.

Steele and Addison provided the vehicle to supply the demand created by this new reading public. As Greene says, "Literature suddenly doffed its stately garb of folio or octavo and stepped abroad in the light and easy dress of pamphlet and essay." The garb had changed, but the essay thus brought into being is not essentially different from the older essay of Bacon and Cowley. The subjects are still the commonplaces of life; but instead of being treated in the abstract, as was generally the custom with the older essayists who wrote for men of learning like themselves, they are presented in the concrete. Instead of a philosophical discourse "Of Petticoats," we see the offending garment brought into the Tatler's Court and gravely banished from the world of fashion. "Of Precedence," "Of Country Manners," "Of False Delicacy," etc., are no longer shown "with their several parts or kindes, with their distinctions, the several causes, adjuncts, and effects of each sort and kinde." We see, instead, a group of country gentlemen acting in a way suggestive of the *noli episcopari* of ecclesiastical procedure; a typical fox-hunting squire, representative of an ignorant gentry who are the greatest enemies of the King and Government; and a linen draper condemned to the loss of his tongue because he talks of such suggestive things as "linen" and "smocks" in the presence of a lady of quality. The purpose of Steele and Addison is frankly different from that of the earlier essayists. Not for diversion simply do they write, but "to banish vice and ignorance out of the territories of Great Britain." The tone of the periodical essays is therefore generally satirical

in contrast with that of the normal essay of the earlier period; but there is noticeable the same classical reserve and detachment as is present in the compositions of Cowley, Cornwallis, and Robert Johnson. Bickerstaff and the *Spectator* always preserve the bearing of a dispassionate observer, of one who is more grieved than angered by the petty foibles of his fellow countrymen. It is to be further noted that controversial subjects as such have no more place in the *Tatler* and *Spectator* than they have in the early essay. Strong adherent as Addison was of the party of the Revolution, he never allowed his political prejudices to lead him into the errors of violence and temper that so often disgrace the pamphlets of his time. The fate of the *Guardian*, if not of the *Tatler*, is a warning to the writer who forsakes the quiet walks of the literary essay for the rocky path of the political pamphlet. Throughout the history of the essay contemporary events and controversial questions have been excluded. The *Tatler* and *Spectator* were the product of the time of Marlborough wars, but how often do the victories of the British arms form topics for discussion in the daily essay? Lamb was an accomplished essayist when England was at death grips with Napoleon, but I recall only a single mention of Bonaparte's name in any of his writings. So it is with religious controversy. Bacon writes dispassionately "Of Religion" at a time when people were thinking much more of differences that separated the sects than of the common bond of fellowship between them.

But again an exception must be made where it is a matter of literary criticism. Writing about a book he loves or dislikes, as the case may be, the essayist is bound to throw aside his characteristic reserve and appear as an ardent advocate or prosecutor. It was so with the Renais-

sance scholars who cultivated the poise and reserve of their classical masters. Even Sir Philip Sidney, a typical product of the Renaissance, wrote with enthusiasm of *Chevy Chase* and with scorn of *Gorboduc*. In the garb of essayists, though not of the kind which affects this discussion closely, Dryden and Temple actually took part in the literary controversy which received its quietus in Swift's *Battle of the Books*. Addison has given up for the time being the rôle of a detached critical observer, to assume that of an advocate. It does not concern us here to discuss Addison's critical essays any further than to note that they glance backward to classical models and classical canons of poetry, that their appeal is to the learned reading public, and that incidentally the writer enforces, even in the Milton papers, his strictures on extravagance in language and conduct.

Steele and Addison have generally been accepted as typical "Augustan" essayists. In taking leave of the century it is only necessary to mention Goldsmith and Johnson as later representatives. *The Citizen of the World* is in no way inferior to the more famous *Spectator*, but why are the *Rambler* and *Idler* now read only from a sense of duty? Is the explanation not found in the fact that Johnson's essays are, generally speaking, a reversion to type? Here we have the old subjects treated abstractly in the manner of Bacon and Cornwallis. It is not enough to say that the style is ponderous. So too is the style of Gibbon and Burke, in a sense, but their subjects are never commonplace. Through Addison, Steele, and Goldsmith we have become accustomed to seeing the foibles and weaknesses of mankind treated in a light, playful fashion; Johnson's attempts to be free and airy usually suggest the effect of a rigadon played on a trombone. The

ponderous style lends itself more fitly to the serious and abstract, but the day for that kind of essay passed when the curtain was rung down upon "Aphoristic" essayists.

II

Nature and destiny combined to make an essayist of Charles Lamb, as they had combined to make an historian of Gibbon. He says himself that had it not been for an impediment in his speech he should have entered the pulpit; the same defect, "even more than certain personal disqualifications," may have prevented him from going on the stage; his duties as clerk until the age of fifty, and his noble solicitude for his afflicted sister, left him little leisure for prolonged literary effort. On the other hand, these very circumstances forced him to seek expression in the shorter compositions that have made his name famous. But apart altogether from the conditions in which his life was passed, Lamb's genius was suited for the essay. Whatever virtues *Rosamond Gray* and *John Woodvil* possess, they unquestionably show that the author was deficient in constructive powers as well as in capacity for character drawing in story and drama. For one kind of character sketching he had, as will be shown later, a peculiar felicity, but this aptitude merely points with other finger-posts along the highway of the essay.

To get a complete idea of Lamb the essayist, attention must not be centered entirely upon the *Elia* collections. No doubt these contain what Lamb considered the best of his contributions to the London Magazines, but it is difficult to understand some of the omissions. When, for instance, he saw fit to include *On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century* and *Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty*, why did he not reprint *On the Tragedies of*

Shakespeare, written in 1811, as he did the *Bachelor's Complaint*, written in the same year? *Edax on Appetite*, *Hospita on Immoderate Indulgence*, and *On the Custom of Hissing at the Theatres*, not to mention a dozen other pieces which are now included in the Miscellaneous Prose, are all worthy of a place in the collection which will be Lamb's passport on the day of Judgment.

"My Essays," wrote Lamb to his publishers, "want no preface; they are *all preface*. A preface is nothing but a talk with the reader; and they do nothing else." This is exactly the attitude of all the earlier essayists. Nothing in Lamb—not even the autobiographical element—is so suggestive of Montaigne as the jovial contempt he frequently shows for any sort of unity in his essays. They are, as all the older essays professed to be, only "imperfect offers, loose sallies of the mind, irregular or undigested pieces,"⁶ that "rather glaunce at all things with a running conceit, than insist on any with a slowe discourse."⁷ *In Praise of Chimney Sweepers*, is a good example of what an essay subject may become,—a mere starting point from which various related or unrelated ideas may be developed. With the exception of the last two pages, the *Praise* is so attenuated as to be as near *nil* as can be. The text, *Old China*, is again a mere starting point, the real subject of the piece being the joys of easy poverty as against the cares of affluence. Like Montaigne and Cornwallis, Lamb refuses to "chain himself to the head of his chapter." In the very last lines the original situation, the imaginary theme, is recalled as a joke by the essayist. Of course, an author who indulges in such vagaries may write at any length according to his mood, the allotted space, or the fecundity of his mind. Montaigne writes a

⁶ Johnson's *Dictionary*.

⁷ Tuval, *Vade Mecum*.

couple of pages on the subject *That the House of Parley is Dangerous*, a page on *Idleness*, sixty on *Vanity*, and seventy *Upon Some Verses of Virgil*. But Montaigne was not writing for a magazine, and Lamb was; consequently the latter had to set some limit to his digressions other than that fixed by the fertility of his brain. But there is ample evidence that he approached his subject in just the same way as Montaigne. Professor Walker's statement that the essays of Lamb and Montaigne "could under no circumstances expand into treatises; they are complete in themselves," is meaningless or wrong, or else the critic is insisting upon the formality of the treatise. Take for example one of the essays just mentioned. *In Praise of Chimney Sweepers* is evidently an expansion of a short paper entitled *A Sylvan Surprise* published as *Table Talk* in the *Examiner* ten years earlier. *Rejoicings Upon the New Year's Coming of Age*, one of the sprightliest of all the *Elia* essays, is an expanded form of the *Fable for Twelfth Day* printed in 1802. Furthermore, two paragraphs in the *Rejoicings* were expanded into separate papers which appeared a couple of years later. One of these delightful passages in the longer piece must be quoted: "Order being restored—the young lord (who, to say truth, had been a little ruffled, and put beside his oratory) in as few, and yet obliging words as possible, assured them of entire welcome; and, with a graceful turn, singling out poor *Twenty-ninth of February*, that had sate all this while mumchance at the sideboard, begged to couple his health with that of the good company before him—which he drank accordingly; observing, that he had not seen his honest face any time these four years, with a number of endearing expressions besides. At the same time, removing the solitary Day from the forlorn seat which had been assigned him, he stationed him at his own board, some-

where between the *Greek Calends* and *Latter Lammas*." This is the kernel of the *Remarkable Correspondent* (1825) which complains of the neglect that Hone's *Everyday Book* has shown toward Leap-year's day; it begins "Sir,—I am the youngest of Three hundred and sixty-six brethren—there are no fewer of us—who have the honour, in the words of the good old Song, to call the Sun our Dad." The other instance is the dispute between the Twelfth of August and the Twenty-Third of April which forms the basis for *The Humble Petition of an Unfortunate Day* in Hone's *Everyday Book* two years later.

It is readily seen that most of the pieces which appear in *Elia* as *Popular Fallacies* are just the kind of fancies that Lamb might have expanded into essays. As a matter of fact two or three of these compositions are in Lamb's happiest style and are in no way different from the *Essays*. Numbers XII to XVI contain some of the best work of *Elia*. The last, "The Pleasures of Sulkiness" is much in the style of Montaigne, only here Lamb is poking fun at himself, laying bare, in the manner of Mr. Arnold Bennett, the little, mean, kinks that sometimes tend to warp the most generous soul. One of the Fallacies (that a deformed person is a Lord) was published as a separate piece under the title *A Popular Fallacy. Characters of Dramatic writers, contemporary with Shakespeare*, which are not essays in themselves, are best considered as the kernels of essays, rough and ready thoughts occasioned by Lamb's reading, which might have been expanded into real "critical essays."

That Lamb, both consciously and unconsciously, modelled his writings on those of the old masters of English prose there is ample evidence. He has the characteristic attitude of the essayists toward what is old. His predecessors of the seventeenth century were never tired of

quoting the classics; Lamb is constantly quoting the old English classics. The names of Sir Thomas Browne, Fuller, Butler, Marvel, Shakespeare, and the old dramatists are those which most often appear in the essays, and quotations from their writings are to be found in abundance. Classical references of course are numerous, but as has been pointed out, the general reading public of Lamb's day was no longer the kind to respond to such an appeal; moreover, Lamb was thoroughly convinced that his own native English contained stores as rich as any to be found in the literature of Greece and Rome. Not only in the matter of literature does this respect for antiquity, or the antiquated, and neglect of the contemporary appear. The passing of the sun-dial, the change in readers, who no longer read for pleasure as they did thirty years ago, the deterioration in acting, the decay of beggars and schoolmasters, are all subjects of complaint, though of course the complaint must be taken only half seriously. Attention has already been called to the fact that there is but one distinct reference to the Napoleonic wars in all the essays—a fact that is more easily understood in 1917 than it would have been three years ago. References to contemporaries like Hunt, Hazlitt, and Coleridge fall in a different category, being inevitable in autobiographical essays.

Lamb carries on the tradition of Bacon and Addison, yet in a sense he is greater than either. Elia's aphorisms are frequently as wise as Bacon's, but they are not so closely packed together as to form the tissue of the essay. One always feels that Bacon has something very wise to say, that the proper thing to do is to listen attentively. Lamb, on the other hand, frequently startles his readers by some profound observation in the midst of seemingly trivial talk. Frequently it is apparent that Lamb has little or

nothing to say, and then he performs the *tour de force* of holding his reader by saying nothing in a clever, interesting way. *The Convalescent* is an instance. Contrast with this the very next piece *On The Sanity of True Genius*. The former is spun out of mere nothing; in the latter the essayist grapples with a real text. Did Bacon ever sound more profound depths of wisdom than Lamb on the subject of oaths (*Imperfect Sympathies*) or ceremony (*Bachelor's Complaint*)? Whether the answer is "Yes" or "No," there are few readers that will not find Lamb's offering more acceptable than Bacon's. The latter teaches *ex cathedra*, the former inveigles us into the ways of wisdom.

Like Bacon, Lamb occasionally talks in abstract terms, as for example in *Stage Illusion*; more frequently, however, the subject is opened in a general way and illustrated by an interesting anecdote, much in the manner of Fuller's *Holy and Profane State*. Examples of this kind of essay are *Witches and Other Night Fears*, *The Old and New Schoolmaster* and *The Two Races of Men*. But one cannot say that Lamb has any particular method of treatment. He uses every method. In fact, it is Lamb's versatility, his protean temper, his facility of surprise both in individual pieces and in successive essays, that make the *Essays of Elia* supreme amongst their kind. One critic has described the literary essay as being "moulded by some central mood—whimsical, serious or satirical." The adjective "serious" of this description applies suitably to Bacon's essays, individually and in mass; "satirical" to the *Tatler* and *Spectator*; "whimsical" applies with special force to the essays of Lamb. Its application, however, should be in a sense somewhat different from that in which the critic seems to use it. Instead of meaning "odd," let it mean "according to the whim of the moment," and the

term becomes more significant than either serious or satirical, because more inclusive. Lamb is a "whimsical" essayist in both senses of the word. What could be more fantastical than the *Autobiography of Mr. Munden, Rejoicing upon the New Year's Coming of Age, Roast Pig, and the Remarkable Correspondent?* *Tombs of the Abbey* is in a serious vein throughout. None of the other essayists, excepting Steele occasionally, writes with such pathos as permeates *Dream Children* and underlies *The Wedding*. The nice balance preserved between the light and the pathetic in the last named essay is an instance of the danger in declaring that one special mood gives the key to any individual composition of Lamb's. When we speak of satire we think of Lamb in relation to the eighteenth-century periodical essayists. Like Addison's, the satire of Lamb is always light, never vindictive or canine, as is usually the case in Hazlitt's essays. In the *Imperfect Sympathies* the writer suggests that perhaps the imperfection is in himself. *On the Custom of Hissing at the Theatres, Hospita on the Immoderate Indulgence of the Pleasures of the Palate, Edax on Appetite, A Vision of Horns*, and others, are very much in the style of the *Tatler* and *Spectator*. The essay last named immediately suggests Addison's *Vision of Justice* in form and substance, but as compared with the latter is crude and ineffective. Addison's infallible decorum allows him to handle a delicate subject in such a way that only the humor of the satire is impressed upon the reader. Lamb is not always decorous, and in this instance there is something repulsive, a lack of nice taste, which probably persuaded him to omit the piece from the *Elia* collection.

Epigram and aphorism, the stock in trade of the older essayists, are abundantly present everywhere in Lamb, but in using them the nineteenth-century writer has improved

upon his masters. Lamb's purpose is to entertain his readers, not to provide an exercise in mental gymnastics. Bacon parades his witticisms and profound general truths in massed battalions. Lamb's method is to lead them out in extended order—a more effective if less imposing arrangement. The occasional epigram gives a fillip to the intellect and raises the commonplace to a higher plane without forcing the mind to be constantly on the alert. The usual way with Lamb, as with all essayists, is to open up the subject with a striking statement that immediately arrests attention. "The human species," thus he begins *The Two Races of Men*, "according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, *the men who borrow and the men who lend*." "I have no ear—" are the opening words of *A Chapter on Ears*. Wealth of allusion, apt metaphor and simile are qualities of style that every prose writer requires who wishes to be interesting. Lamb's felicity in this respect is too obvious to be insisted upon here; every critic of the essayist has discussed these elements of his style. The peculiar effect of Lamb's style is best expressed in the word "unexpectedness." He can be grave and gay, dignified and playful, grandiose and simple, rhetorical and pathetic in successive compositions and sometimes in the same essay. The style is as whimsical as the mood which produces it, and the exact correspondence of the two constitutes the special charm of Lamb's essays. In this respect he is far superior to all his predecessors. Bacon seldom if ever unbends. The eighteenth-century periodical writers, to whom Lamb is much more nearly allied, are always dignified. To apply a phrase of Mr. Chesterton's, their style never plays the fool, though it sometimes takes a holiday. One never finds in the *Spectator*, the *Tatler*, or the *Citizen of the World* the delightful abandonment, the breathless hilarity

of *Poor Relations*, *The Praise of Chimney Sweepers*, *A Chapter on Ears*, and the *Autobiography of Mr. Munden*. To appreciate the full range of Lamb's power one should read in succession a series like the following; any one of the list given, *Old China*, *Rejoicings upon the New Year's Coming of Age*, *The Tragedies of Shakespeare*, *Sanity of True Genius*, and *Dream Children*.

The seventeenth-century "character" is a form nearly related to the essay. The decade which saw the first edition of Bacon's *Essays* witnessed the appearance of Casaubon's Latin translation of Theophrastus's *Characters*. The normal character is a brief composition consisting of sententious, epigrammatic, often paradoxical statements, defining and describing a person or thing not as an individual but as representative of a class. The essential difference from the essay lies in the concrete treatment of the character and the satirical mood of the writer. But this has reference to the normal type of both character and essay. Frequently the two forms exchange garb to such an extent that the reader, if not the writer, is at a loss to distinguish between them. This tendency towards fusion is well illustrated by the titles of many of the earlier character-books: *Characters upon Essays*,⁸ *Essays and Characters of a Prison*,⁹ *Characters or Essays of Persons, Trades and Places*,¹⁰ etc.

As a writer of characters in the seventeenth-century meaning of the word, Lamb is an adept. But just as he was too versatile an essayist to conform to any particular mould, so in character writing he is too great an adept to confine himself to any form or any particular mood. Sympathy with his fellow-men and his kindly nature would

⁸ Nicholas Breton, 1615

⁹ Gefray Mynshul, 1618.

¹⁰ "R. M." *Micrologia, Characters, etc.*, 1629.

not allow him to indulge in the mordant, satirical humor that ordinarily gives pungency to the seventeenth-century character. Moreover, interest in the life around him forbade his dwelling on the abstract qualities of a class when he saw only the concrete eccentricities of an individual. At the same time Lamb does write characters of the older kind. His versatility is amazing. Nothing makes greater demand upon the "sheer wit" of an author than a character sketch that consists only of happy epigrams; and nothing of the same length in all Elizabethan and Jacobean literature is more clever than the first three paragraphs of *Poor Relations*. At the end of the first he seems to gasp for breath to utter an adequate "apology to your friends." And so for two more pages he seems to challenge the whole field of character writers—Earle, Overbury, Butler, and the rest, to do their worst—or best—and he will meet them on any field with their own weapons. And to round off the piece he gives the pathetic "instance" of "Poor W—" of Christ's college, and "the mysterious figure of an aged gentleman clothed in neat black" whom the author remembered to have seen at his father's table every Saturday. Such a closing recalls the manner of Thomas Fuller's *Holy and Profane State*, but again with a difference, Lamb using instances from his own experience, Fuller drawing them from history. In only one character does Lamb show the bared teeth of the satirist,—in *The Good Clerk*, which is otherwise very reminiscent of his beloved Fuller. The *Character of an Undertaker*, appended to the essay *On Burial Societies*, is entirely in the style of Earle; *Tom Pry* and *Tom Pry's Wife* in the "Lepus" papers recall similar pieces in the *Spectator* and *Tatler*. In *My Relations* Lamb draws the portrait of his "aunt" and his "cousin," James Elia, in the humorous manner and loving spirit of the Sir Roger

de Coverley papers. *The Gentle Giantess* and *A Character* (of Egomet) are more in the modern style of character sketches. The delightful *Convalescent* is a character in Lamb's style only.

As has been remarked above, *Rosamond Gray* and *John Woodvil* prove pretty conclusively that Lamb lacked the capacity for showing the gradual development of character through action and conflict. His genius was not suited to such a task. No character excepting that of Bridget Elia recurs in the essays, and it seems entirely improbable that Lamb had the intention of giving any sort of unity to the *Elia* pieces by this device. Yet the Bridget essays inevitably suggest the Jenny Bickerstaff numbers of the *Tatler* and the Sir Roger papers of the *Spectator*. Whether there was intention or not on the part of Lamb in following the lead of the eighteenth-century masters, it is obvious that Bridget Elia is much more shadowy as a character than either Jenny Bickerstaff or Sir Roger de Coverley.

The autobiographical element in the *Essays of Elia* has often been discussed. For the purpose of this article it is necessary to allude to it only in a general way. The personal element in Lamb's essays shows similarity to, and difference from, the same feature in Montaigne's. Given the key, one can re-construct a great part of Lamb's life from *Elia*. How much could one reconstruct of Montaigne's life from his writings? The latter writes of what he sees, feels, thinks, and reads; Lamb does all that, but also talks frankly of many incidents of his life. The names that one meets in reading Montaigne are those of celebrities, and Montaigne usually speaks of them as such. Lamb talks of famous men of old and of the present, but he also has a great deal to say of his friends and acquaintances. In Lamb's work Coleridge is not so much a great English poet as a close friend of the author; hence there is

a double interest when the names of Coleridge, Hunt, Boyle, and Hazlitt occur. To quote from S. C. Hill's introduction to the second series of the *Essays of Elia*: "In Lamb's writings, as in Montaigne's, the subject is the writer himself—not, however, the mere individual Lamb, but Lamb as he was connected with his numerous friends, as his sympathy identified him with the inhabitants of the great city in which he lived." In other words, Lamb betters the instruction of his masters where the autobiographical as well as where most of the other elements of the essay are concerned.

Many of Lamb's essays are not in the dispassionate essay mood. Frequently the *indignatio saeva* is merely affected, as for instance when he makes his bachelor's complaint against the display of married happiness, or when he warms his wrath against the "sea-charmed emigrants" from town who, trained in the pit of the London concert halls, pretend to find a pleasure in the music of the waves—because it is the fashion. But in *Readers against the Grain* his anger, if not white hot, is genuine, because the offence is simulated, half-hearted, empty loyalty to a sovereign who, according to Lamb's way of thinking, demands whole-souled allegiance or none at all. And this brings us to the subject of Lamb's literary criticism, not the excellence or limitations of it,—that has been treated often enough already,—but its place in Lamb's essays.

When the question is one that concerns literature or any allied subject in which Lamb has a special interest, painting or acting, he never pretends to assume a detached attitude,—that is one of the reasons why his remarks are so readable. *On the Genius and Character of Hogarth* was written quite frankly for the purpose of combating the "vulgar notion" respecting the artist. *The Tragedies of Shakespeare* was inspired by the inscription to Garrick in

the Abbey which practically puts the actor on a par with the dramatist. This aroused Lamb's ire and became the occasion of one of the most famous passages in literary criticism. But Lamb overstated his own case and was led by his passion into uttering a paradox. The same thing happened in the essay *On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*. Lamb loved paradox; he loved to shock conventionality. "I like a smuggler," he says in *The Old Margate Hoy*, "he is the only honest thief." He does not approve of the crusade against Beggars, "the oldest and honourablest form of pauperism." Frequently whole passages give the effect of paradox, although he is not stating paradoxes. *Popular Fallacies* witness to the same predilection for the unpopular side. So in the two famous critical pieces mentioned above, he has just been led to utter a paradox and afterwards forced to bolster his thesis with special pleadings. For while there is much truth in every part of these two essays, the total impression that remains after seeing a good performance of one of Shakespeare's tragedies is that they are fitted for presentation on the stage; and after reading many of the comedies of the eighteenth century, one is forced to conclude that the dramatists of that period did take delight in shocking the ordinary views of morality.

III

The claims of most of the essayists since Lamb to precedence may be disposed of without much discussion. By the accident of 1776, if for no other reason, Washington Irving, Emerson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes are disqualified from running. Macaulay, Carlyle, and Matthew Arnold belong to another category of essayists. Their work is nearly all critical or biographical, and the com-

pleteness and finish of the separate pieces belie the real significance of the general title they bear. Moreover, in each case the attitude and the spirit of the writer are far removed from those of the traditional essayist. Macaulay proves his point by mercilessly beating down his opponents with the sledge-hammer blows of his argument. Carlyle poses as a preacher, and not a very happy one. He is generally in a rage with an unbelieving or, worse still, an unthinking generation; and though the passion may be justified and generally does credit to the writer, it militates against his claims as an essayist. In matters of criticism Arnold "settles *hoti's* business, dead from the waist down." *Iipse dixit*. "There nis no more to saye." But Arnold really does not call for consideration here at all, as his essays make no claim to be other than critical.

Of all the nineteenth-century essayists who challenge Lamb's position, William Hazlitt deserves first consideration of his claims. If one wished to avoid the issue, the thesis that Lamb was the "last" of the essayists might be defended on the ground of chronology, the collected editions of Hazlitt being slightly earlier than those of Lamb. But the two writers are really contemporaries and should be judged as such. In one respect, Hazlitt is the greater essayist; page for page his writings contain more of wisdom than Lamb's. In this sense Bacon is the greatest of all the essayists. But it has been pointed out that aphorism and epigram may be carried too far, and the combined effect of Hazlitt's rather saturnine genius and epigrammatic style is one of depression, if not fatigue, when several of his essays are read in succession. *On the Knowledge of Character* contains a significant passage; "What is it to me that I can write these Table-Talks? It is true I can, by a reluctant effort, rake up a parcel of half-for-

gotten observations, but they do not float on the surface of my mind, nor stir it with any sense of pleasure, now even of pride. Others have more property in them than I have: *they* may reap the benefit, *I* have only had the pain." This is a far remove from Lamb's "make-shift papers" or "talks" with the reader. Lamb's words, of course, are not to be taken too literally; but it is hard to conceive any of his essays as being the slow product of "reluctant effort." Hazlitt's remarks on men and things are almost always caustic. The "singularity" of the views advanced in *Prometheus Unbound* is the object of several pages of bitter sarcasm. The *amende honorable* which he sees fit to make is an equally bitter arraignment of the "finished common-place" of Mr. Canning's Liverpool speech. Lamb once wrote a sharp letter to Southey, reproaching him for an unjustifiable censure of the irreligion of parts of the *Essays*. All of this letter that Lamb considered as representative of Elia was the part which displayed the least personal animus—*The Tombs in the Abbey*. In the essay, *On Vulgarities and Affectation*, Hazlitt goes out of his way to "make an example" of one who had seen fit to condemn his dramatic criticisms. Such "gall in the ink," while it lends poignancy to the words, detracts from the pleasure of reading the essays as a whole, and points to a real limitation in Hazlitt as an essayist. With all his wisdom, epigram, and paradox, he lacks the versatility of his contemporary. He writes *de omnibus rebus et quibusdam aliis*, he chats in an extremely interesting and informal way, generally instructive and always stimulating, but he cannot write in all moods and all styles. In all but a very few essays like *Reading Old Books*, one misses the effect of sunshine and blue sky, the effect, say, of such pieces as Lamb's *Mackery End* and *Captain Jackson*.

No one would claim for Leigh Hunt a place amongst essayists as high as that of his contemporary Lamb. Hunt's reputation has inevitably suffered from the effects of his enormous journalistic activity. He produced too much to produce much that is good, and when account is taken of the fact that his abilities at best were only mediocre—at least as compared with those of his brilliant contemporaries—the position he holds amongst essayists is easily explained. Nearly all the critics try to be as charitable with Hunt as they can be with justice, simply because he was, like "The Man in Black" in the *Citizen of the World*, "tolerably good-natured without the least harm in him." The subjects he treats are commonplace, and it must be said his treatment is generally commonplace, sprightly perhaps, but still commonplace. His essays give in the bulk the impression of triviality, dilettantism, diffuseness, even padding. This does not mean that there are not good things to be found, but that much reading is necessary to discover something that is worth while. Hunt should be read in a "pretty" edition. The collection, for example, edited by Arthur Symonds and illustrated by H. M. Brock has this great advantage, that if one tires of the reading one may turn with pleasure to the pictures. Hazlitt's opinion that Leigh Hunt "inherits more of the spirit of Steele than any man since his time," if true, means only that the English Essay had outgrown the garb of the *Tatler*, or that Isaac Bickerstaff had become a mere shade amongst English essayists.

Many are inclined to think that Stevenson's fame will rest upon his essays. Whether this estimate is true or not, he must always be ranked very high amongst English essayists; posterity will ultimately have to decide as to the relative excellence of his novels and essays. The question

to be considered here is whether as an essayist he ranks as high as Charles Lamb, whether after all he is an essayist in the same sense as Lamb. In the first place, Stevenson's essays are usually much longer than Lamb's, and as a rule the compositions of the former have an approximate uniformity in this respect. The contents include a fairly large variety of subject matter, yet the bulk of the literary and biographical pieces is relatively much greater than in the case of Lamb's essays. These are small points, and yet they have a real bearing on the question of the total impression made by the collections of the two essayists. A cursory glance at the table of contents indicates a difference between the two. When the essays themselves are examined simply as "essays," several marked differences appear. As against the "crude, unlicked, incondite things" of Lamb the essays of Stevenson at once impress the reader as being elaborate, complete, *finished* pieces. Such a comparison does not necessarily imply disparagement of the one, nor undue praise of the other. Who shall decide which displays the greater "art" as an essayist? The artist who wrote *Kidnapped* is utterly incapable of dashing off for the press a few casual remarks, wise though they be, on some casual subject. The "gossip" on Romance and the "gossip" on a novel of Dumas's are informal only in name. The impression of impromptu is never gained from reading an essay by Stevenson. He nails himself down to his subject and seldom if ever allows himself to digress. He is even chary of illustrative anecdote, and never abandons himself to the mood of the moment. When a reader picks up a volume of Stevenson's essays, he knows pretty well that he will be adequately repaid for half an hour's reading, but he knows also that his delight will be the disciplined, chastened pleasure derived from reading a lyric or a drama. Contrast

with this the pleasure one gets from the unexpectedness of Lamb's essays, from reading, say *A Chapter on Ears* and then *Dream Children*. The individual reader must say, of course, which kind of pleasure he prefers and thus decide which is his favorite essayist; but Stevenson's is not the way of the traditional essay, the essay of Bacon, of Cowley, of Addison, and Lamb. Besides, there is in Stevenson too much of the participant in life's contests and too little of the spectator to admit him to full communion with the masters.

When mention is made of *The Roundabout Papers*, the nineteenth-century collections that seriously challenge comparison with *Elia* are about exhausted. "In these essaykins," says Thackeray, "I have taken leave to egotise. I cry out about the shoes which pinch me, and, as I fancy, more naturally and pathetically than if my neighbour's corns were trodden under foot." And while the *Roundabouts* treat of almost every conceivable subject in the desultory style of Montaigne, the sentence just quoted gives on the whole the keynote of the collection. The shoes do pinch whoever wears them, and however naturally and pathetically the writer may talk of the discomfort, Thackeray the essayist is always the same as Thackeray the novelist. The "essaykins" are for the most part of a piece with the philosophical digressions one meets so frequently in all Thackeray's novels; somewhat more expanded, of course, and furnished with an occasion or text to give each a sort of unity. "All claret would be port if it could." . . . "In literature, in politics, in the army, the navy, the church, at the bar, in the world, what an immense quantity of cheap liquor is made to do service for better sorts!" The quotations taken from the two essays hardly do justice to the collection as a whole, in which there is a great deal in Thackeray's best style,—

allusion, wit, wisdom, pathos; but the total effect of reading the *Roundabout Papers* is the same as that produced by reading the novels, a feeling of depression.

In the foregoing discussion an attempt has been made to show in outline that the English essay has had an almost unbroken career as a literary form from the time of Bacon to the late nineteenth century, and in particular that the *Essays of Elia* are lineal descendants of ancestors that flourished in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. And not only are Lamb's essays in the main current of what may be called the "literary essay," but precedence may fairly be claimed for them over any other similar collection in English. Lamb used all styles of essay-writing, and in the words of Johnson's epitaph on Goldsmith, he touched nothing which he did not adorn. In skilful handling of the materials with which essayists have worked, aphorism, epigram, character-writing, literary criticism, etc., he has proved himself second to none, and in versatility, whether of style, mood, or wit, superior to all the rest.

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